

August Ludwig von Rochau, *Foundations of Realpolitik* (1853)

Abstract

A nationalist student radical in his younger days in the 1830s, August Ludwig von Rochau (1810–1873) spent years in exile and was an active supporter of the Revolution of 1848. Disillusioned by the revolution's ultimate failure, Rochau enunciated a changed political philosophy in his *Grundsätze der Realpolitik* [*Foundations of Realpolitik*] of 1853 (thereby coining the term). The work became a byword for the selling out of liberal idealism to the conservative power politics that would bring about German unification by warfare under Bismarck in the years 1864–1871. It has tended to be viewed this way by scholars ever since. Such a reading of Rochau, however, runs some risk of anachronism, and a closer look at his views reveals continuing echoes of his liberal conception of society and his liberal goals for politics. A critique of idealistic value judgements of constitutions without a basis in power is certainly present, but so too is a progressive call for all social groups and social forces to be integrated into politics, either in the present for those forces already developed, or in the future for those not yet so far along. Liberal ideas and rights also feature among such social forces. Scrutinizing the original meanings of *Realpolitik* can help rethink the meaning and implications of the term today.

Source

I. The Dynamic Basic Law of the Polity

The political organism of human society, the state, arises and persists by virtue of a natural law that human beings fulfil voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously. It was in this sense that the old saying “man is a political animal” was uttered; it is in this sense that a well-known modern doctrine asserts that the state comes from God. Properly understood, both statements have the same meaning.

The natural necessity upon which the existence of the state as it is historically given rests is fulfilled by the interaction of a variety of forces, whose nature, extent and results are endlessly various in time and space. The study of the forces that shape, carry and transform the state is the starting point of all political knowledge, whose first step leads to the insight that the law of the strong over political life exerts a similar dominion to that of the law of gravity over the physical world.

This truth was inherent to older political science, which however drew a false and pernicious conclusion from it—that might makes right. The modern age corrected this immoral fallacy, but by rejecting the purported right of the stronger it was all too inclined to misjudge the actual power of the stronger and the necessity of its political validity. This error has been the cause of the grossest blunders and the worst defeats committed and suffered by constitutional politics in the majority of European states for several generations now.

The discussion of who should rule, whether law, wisdom, virtue, an individual, the few or the many, is a matter that belongs in the realm of philosophical speculation; practical politics must deal with the simple fact that power alone can rule. To rule is to exercise power, and only those who have power can exercise it. This direct connection between power and political rule constitutes the fundamental truth of all politics and the key to the entire story. It is the misguided pride of the human mind that refuses to acknowledge this circumstance, or that at least regards it as an abuse that can and must be remedied. The notion of such a remedy is a logical contradiction, and any attempt to realize it aims at nothing less

than a reversal of the eternal nature of things.

The existence of the state does not depend on the political consciousness of its members. This consciousness is, however, the essential prerequisite for public law. One may therefore say that the state precedes the law. But the law is by no means banished to the heels of the state; it may overtake the latter, and it may seek its own paths—in other words, the law is to power what the idea is to the fact. This purely conceptual relationship becomes real only when and to the extent that the idea of law becomes embodied in public power, or when power transfigures itself as the idea of law. For that reason, according to its own understanding, the law is however wholly independent of power, but in its authority is essentially conditioned and strictly circumscribed by the degree of power at its disposal. And not just coincidentally and temporarily, but with natural necessity, and, as it was yesterday and today, until the end of days. Only as power is the law called to rule, that is, capable of ruling. It is therefore a quite inadmissible, one could even say an irrational, demand to expect power to be subordinate to law. Power obeys only a greater power, and the strong cannot permit themselves to be ruled by the weak, even if they wished it, or rather could wish it.

As was already noted, the misunderstanding of the dynamic basic law of the state system has caused the greatest errors and blunders of which the state theories and the experimental politics of the century have rightly been accused. The idea of the state sought to dominate the material of the state before it had penetrated the latter; the formal recognition of law was supposed to replace its independent force; people assumed that political power could be relinquished and acquired by contract, and expanded or limited by agreement. These deceptions have exacted a severe toll. The previous political system, which minds have revered almost blindly, has been thwarted so often and so miserably by things that it must at last become the object of the deep distrust of one side and the thorough disgust of the other. The cloud castles it built have dissolved into thin air; the defenseless law, whose theoretical acknowledgement it effects, has become at best a mere pseudo-exercise, which power tolerated as long as it was pleased to do so; at the very first test, the agreements between impotence and violence proved themselves to be ineffective, void from the outset and impossible.

The state's constitution is conditioned by the interrelationship between the forces within it, both active and passive. Each social force lays claim to a political value that corresponds to its scope, and the state force itself consists merely of the sum of the social forces that the state itself has incorporated. In order for the state to be strong it must therefore above all cultivate and promote the individual strengths of its members, but soon also be in a position to appropriate them. As a rule, this cultivation and promotion will proceed by providing the greatest possible scope, whereby this appropriation occurs only through organic connection. The supplementation, correction, and preservation of the relationship between the various social forces and the overall state that arise from such a connection constitute the task of constitutional politics. The stuff of constitutional politics is thus not merely given, but also living, which as such must be treated with conscientious consideration for its natural state. That abstract scientific or fundamental treatment is nothing less than beneficial is clear from experience and can be explained in terms of the manifold nature of social conditions, which defy calculation, or of the political substance. In this way, constitutional politics has not progressed beyond failed attempts in practice, or fantasies in theory, grotesque like Plato's Republic or idyllic like Rousseau's social contract, in any case historically untrue, politically useless and even philosophically untenable.

If the question of the absolutely "good" or "best" constitution cannot be rejected out of hand, it is at any rate the very last one that politics can throw up. A good or proper constitution is that which allows all social forces to reach their potential within the state according to their full worth. The more intimately the social matter penetrates the state form and the more completely it fills it, the healthier the body politic is, even if its outer form exhibits irregularities. A wrong constitution, in contrast, is one that denies political organs to the social forces, thereby inhibiting or preventing their effective use of them. This ill tends to be accompanied by a second one, namely that such state structures from which the

natural life force withdraws are artificially extended by the constitution. Recent constitutional politics has frequently made the opposite mistake by establishing within the state, in the name of some principle or theory, arbitrary organs that corresponded to no social motive force, and which accordingly, instead of serving the vital activity of the state, could only press upon it like a dead weight.

The social forces however also include slumbering talents and undeveloped abilities. As long as they exist only as seeds, they naturally have no claim to political value, but it is the irrefutable duty of politics to invigorate them and promote their development, in order to utilize them in future. This duty, however, as imperiously as it imposes itself and as generally as it is recognized in principle, is usually fulfilled only very deficiently. The various dominant social forces, by virtue of the egotism inherent in all living things, fear each new competitor who seeks to create a sphere of influence in the state, and it is for this reason that a new force rarely achieves political recognition without a great struggle. The more rigid and unwieldy the political form, the more effort a new force requires to create space within it, and the more intense is the effect of the final breakthrough. However, not every force ultimately breaks through. It can be smothered in its infancy, or conquered in honest or dishonest battle, it can be crippled by excessive effort even at the moment of victory. Such phenomena, meanwhile, do not detract from the natural law of social life anymore than the natural life of the plant world is harmed because not every blossom becomes a fruit, and not every fruit ripens.

The conduct of politics towards the social forces that have not yet acquired a place in the state organism is essentially influenced by the assessment of their scope and durability. It is of urgent interest for the most and the least selfish politics alike to gain clarity on this point, and carefully to measure and weigh the forces that demand recognition accordingly. Depending on the outcome, from the purely political standpoint the state has no choice but either to appropriate the forces in question or to crush them. The middle course is unpolitical, and the state that steers it risks struggle and peril, for any force the state does not assimilate necessarily becomes its opponent. Many a state has been overcome by an opponent of this kind, whom it has either despised or sought to destroy by inadequate means. The violent extermination of some social force that has not already reached its inner potential is in fact one of the most difficult enterprises in politics, but great historical examples prove that it is by no means impossible.

These examples have nevertheless become increasingly rare over the course of time, whether because the state no longer has the free choice of weapons it once did to prosecute such a campaign of destruction, or because the greater mobility of recent centuries rendered the necessary stamina impossible. The state will, in contrast, generally possess adequate means to fend off, shackle or maim for a time the new forces that seek to invade its territory. A politics whose guiding principle is to safeguard its constitutional basis may apply those means with great success through firm and unflinching handling, but their effects will necessarily turn against the state itself, whose organic connection with society is loosened in this way, and will succumb more surely and sooner to sickness and decrepitude the more completely the influx of fresh social juices is prevented.

A politics that places greater value on the state's vitality than on its constitutional form will accordingly take the opposite path. Such a politics will endeavor to create space for every social force according to its nature, and thereby to assimilate it into the state force itself, regardless of the changes that the existing form or the apparent symmetry of the constitution may suffer through the new organs to be created. The rapid change in the scope and nature of the forces that affect social life is doubtless a worrisome ill for the state, but the elasticity of political forms that willingly affiliates with these changes will at least do more to alleviate than to exacerbate the effects of this ill.

The political greatness of the state is largely conditioned by a certain continuity, not of the political forms, but of the real social forces, to lend a uniform and unaltered direction to a certain political goal; only thanks to this continuity can the time can be gained that is necessary under all circumstances to

achieve great and lasting political successes. Frantic efforts may cause great energies to be unleashed, but the momentary political effects of these will hardly long outlive such fleeting and temporary causes; it is instead quite probable that more will be lost in the inevitable moment of exhaustion than was won in paroxysms. In contrast, just as slow growth guarantees long life in the corporeal world, laborious acquisition guarantees lasting possession in the political realm.

II. The Proportional Value of Social Forces

Social forces are initially of interest to politics only according to their dynamic value, the passive no less than the active, those that do not belong to the state organism as well as those that are incorporated into it, not just the forces of persistence and movement but also the forces of destruction. If the governmental power, the civil service and the military stand for politics in the first rank of politically organized forces, the politically more or less informal intellectual and financial forces in society should not therefore be overlooked or underestimated. Politics that seeks to appreciate the active force of the desire for social innovation according to its true value must take full account of the passive forces of custom, tradition and inertia. Poverty as against wealth, ignorance as against intelligence, prejudice, and most especially stupidity as a social force are of eminent importance for political calculations. Lies or any other immorality and indeed even crime can become a force that, regardless of their anti-social and anti-state nature, not merely ask for but also force political recognition. This is not to say that politics is released from all moral duty, but merely that there is a limit at which the actual possibility of fulfilling this duty ends.^[1]

Many of the forces that have lent the present-day state its form have lost some of their previous significance, whether because they have become outdated or their proportional value has diminished. An instance of the latter is real property, which is being outweighed more and more by the daily growing mass of movable wealth. The power of the aristocratic element in the state, which is rooted in land and has also found a mighty counterweight in many of the intellectual endeavors of our time, has fallen along with the significance of real property. The power of authority altogether, which the wildest forces once obeyed blindly, has been so gnawed away and undermined by criticism that only a few sorry remains are laboriously propped up.

In contrast, a wealth of fresh social forces have shot up, which singly or in a variety of associations demand their place in the life of the state. Civic consciousness, the notion of freedom, national sentiment, the idea of human equality, the spirit of political partisanship and the press are quite new factors of social life for many of today's states. It goes without saying that they deserve state recognition only if their inherent strength is adequate, and it is equally obvious that a proper politics cannot deny them recognition as far as their powers extend.

This is, namely, also the measure of the political legitimacy owed to that epitome of moral-mental moods and tendencies known as public opinion.

[...]

NOTES

^[1] A few examples to explain this idea may be in order here. If the state is in financial difficulties and engages in usurious business with rapacious finance, politics thereby makes a concession to immorality not because it wants to do so, but because it must. In case of rebellion or military mutiny the state can find itself having to reach an agreement with overt criminality. It may even come to pass that the politics of a great state (and the generation still living today has seen more than once such instance) cannot avoid coming to terms with a common brigand chief. Assuming that the government of Ferdinand VII truly did not have the means to destroy the well-known Jose Maria, it was a perfectly proper policy to negotiate and make peace with him—to be sure, only the proper

policy of a wretched government and a state that had sunk very low. Incidentally, it is not simply the weak side of politics to be forced every now and then to put up with immorality. Religion, too, not to mention the church, can find itself in the same situation, for example when it tolerates and even accepts existing slavery. Morality may judge such concessions in its own way, but in any case it must not subject politics to a stricter court than religion.

Source: August Ludwig von Rochau, *Grundzüge der Realpolitik, angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands*. Stuttgart: Karl Göpel, 1853, pp. 1–11. Available online at: <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10561071-0>

Recommended Citation: August Ludwig von Rochau, Foundations of Realpolitik (1853), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5003>> [July 05, 2025].